The superior man understands what is right.
The inferior man understands what will sell.

*The Analects*
Confucianism

An Ideal of Moral Order

Introduction

The story of the life of Confucius is remarkable for its lack of those dramatic events one might have expected in the career of the man who became the "First Teacher" of China and whose influence has extended to this day. No "voices" spoke to him, no miracles are claimed. He never walked on red-hot coals. No visions. Instead, he was only a teacher, and to make matters worse, he talked a great deal about the necessity of our being good. Good fathers and mothers, good sons and daughters, good citizens, good brothers and sisters and friends... Compounding the problem, he had the audacity to lay down rules.

Although Confucius occasionally held minor posts in government, he mostly taught, and he excelled at it: students became disciples. He had, he said of himself, a great love of learning and considered himself a diligent student, but he made no claim to wisdom nor even to high moral character. His ambition was to attain a significant position in government through which he could put into practice the ideas and ideals he taught. That ambition was never realized. After a long teaching career, he retired, spent his last years studying, and died, in Arthur Waley's phrase, "a disappointed itinerant tutor."

The substance of his teaching, described in the following essay by H. G. Creel, dealt with those moral qualities that comprise the chun tzu, the superior man or "true gentleman." The chun tzu was a model of modest strength and decorum: gentle, poised, kind, sincere, dutiful, and trustworthy. He was not, however, an "individual." He was, of course, a person in his own right, but he was primarily a member of a family and of society—and it was this network of responsibilities that concerned Confucius.

The society in which Confucius lived had disintegrated into feuding states, and there were sporadic outbursts of devastating warfare. What was required

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1His family name was K'ung and given name Chung-ni, but as his reputation grew he became known as K'ung Fu-tzu (Master K'ung). In the Latin of Jesuit missionaries, K'ung Fu-tzu came out "Confucius."
first, therefore, was order, but Confucius knew that an inflexible, strong-armed regime of “law and order” was not the answer. Hence the great Confucian virtue of li (the principle of propriety; the proper, structured way of doing things) was to be accompanied by jen (goodness, human-heartedness, kindness). Orderliness and ceremony, in short, were to be observed, but they were to be balanced by a feeling for humanity.

The preponderance of ethical and social content in the teachings of Confucius has often prompted two different responses. On the one hand, Confucianism is sometimes termed a philosophy or, more specifically, “Chinese Humanism,” rather than a religion. On the other hand, laborious attempts have been made to ferret out in Confucian literature those indications of “conventional” religious behavior and conviction that would prove Confucianism a legitimate member of the world’s family of religions. But each of these responses appears to rest on categories of thought more appropriate to Western than to Far Eastern religion.

Confucius was undeniably preoccupied with “down-to-earth” moral issues, but the term humanism implies a dualism foreign to Chinese thought. Confucianism is perhaps best understood as an expression of that older and larger conception in China of a cosmic harmony. The Confucian ideal of social order—of the rules of propriety observed by all, of tradition and ritual enhancing our lives—was a reflection of an Ultimate Order.\(^2\) Heaven, earth, and humankind were, in China, a continuum: the ruler, for example, was the “Son of Heaven” and he ruled only by decree of Heaven. To restore harmony to human society was to return to Tao, the Way. In ancient China, Joseph Kitagawa has written,

> the world of man and the world of nature constitute a seamless whole, governed by reciprocal relationships. . . . Chinese religion never made a distinction between sacred and secular. . . . The religious ethos of the Chinese must be found in the midst of their everyday life. . . . The meaning of life was sought in the whole of life, and not confined to any section of it called specifically “religious.”\(^3\)

The readings of this chapter, apart from the introductory essay by Creel, include selections from two of the Four Books of Confucianism, both of which are products of the followers of Confucius. (Confucius said that he was a “transmitter and not a creator.” It is not certain what, if anything, we have from his own hand.) The Analects is the most important source of the “sayings” and life of Confucius. The Book of Mencius is a collection of the teachings of the “Sec-

\(^2\)This is a theme admittedly not always explicit in early Confucian literature, with the exception of The Doctrine of the Mean (“Equilibrium is the great foundation of the world, and harmony its universal path,” etc.). Neo-Confucianists, however, later pursued the subject extensively.

ond Sage” of China. Tu Wei-ming explains in “Confucian Self-Realization” that the fully realized self is essentially communal, an “open and communicating center of relationships,” and those relationships, it turns out, are with everything from our families to the cosmos.

In the Preface to his Confucius—The Secular as Sacred, Herbert Fingarette, whose essay concludes this chapter, wrote

When I began to read Confucius, I found him to be a prosaic and parochial moralizer. . . . Later, and with increasing force, I found him a thinker with profound insight and with an imaginative vision of man equal in its grandeur to any I know. Increasingly, I have become convinced that Confucius can be a teacher to us today. . . . He tells us things not being said elsewhere; things needing to be said. He has a new lesson to teach.
Mencius said, “In the nurturing of the mind, there is no better method than that of cutting down the number of desires. A man who has few desires, though he may have things in his mind which he should not have, will have but few of them. A man who has many desires, though he may have things in his mind which he should have, will have but few of them.” (7B. 35)

Confucian Self-Realization

Tu Wei-ming

Tu Wei-ming (1940– ) was born in Kunming, China, and came to the United States in 1962. He received his doctorate from Harvard University and has taught at Tunghai University (Taiwan); Princeton; the University of California, Berkeley; and Harvard, where he is Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy. He is active in the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Among his books in English are Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-ming’s Youth; Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness; Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought; Confucian Ethics Today: The Singapore Challenge; Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation; and Way, Learning, and Politics: Essays on the Confucian Intellectual (1993).

Professor Tu has stated that his concentration on the Confucian tradition “is not only the academic commitment of a professional intellectual historian but also the personal quest of a reflective human being.” Widely acclaimed for his scholarly work on Confucianism, he lists that religion as his own.

Personality, in the Confucian perception, is an achieved state of moral excellence rather than a given human condition. An implied distinction is made between what a person is by temperament and what a person has become by self-conscious effort. A person’s natural disposition—whether introverted or extroverted, passive or aggressive, cold or warm, contemplative or active, shy
or assertive—is what the Confucians refer to as that aspect of human nature which is composed of ch’i-chih (vital energy and raw stuff). For the sake of convenience, we may characterize the human nature of vital energy and raw stuff as our psychophysiological nature, our physical nature, or simply the body.

The Confucian tradition—in fact, the Chinese cultural heritage as a whole—takes our physical nature absolutely seriously. Self-cultivation, as a form of mental and physical rejuvenation involving such exercises as rhythmic bodily movements and breathing techniques, is an ancient Chinese art. The classical Chinese conception of medicine is healing in the sense not only of curing disease or preventing sickness but also of restoring the vital energy essential for the wholeness of the body. Since the level of vital energy required for health varies according to sex, age, weight, height, occupation, time, and circumstance, the wholeness of the body is situationally defined as a dynamic process rather than a static structure. The maintenance of health, accordingly, is a fine art encompassing a wide range of environmental, dietary, physiological, and psychological factors. The delicate balance attained and sustained is the result of communal as well as personal effort. To become well and sound is therefore an achievement.

However, the centrality of the physical nature (the body) in the Confucian conception of the person is predicated not only on the irreducibility of the vital energy and raw stuff for personal growth but also on the potentiality of the body to become an aesthetic expression of the self. The wholeness of the body, often understood as allowing the vital energy to flow smoothly, is not only a measuring standard but also a unique accomplishment. Indeed, the idea is laden with ethico-religious as well as psychophysiological implications. When Mencius defines the sage (who has attained the highest moral excellence in the human community) as the person who has brought the bodily form to fruition, he assumes that the body is where the deepest human spirituality dwells. Yet, it is important to note that the Mencian conception of sagehood involves much more than our physical nature.

It seems that the conscious refusal to accept, rather than the lack of conceptual apparatus to perceive, the exclusive dichotomy between body and mind prompts the Confucians to endow rich resources to the idea of the body as the proper home for human flourishing. The ascetic rigor deemed necessary for reaching a higher spiritual state in virtually all major religions is practiced in the Confucian tradition, but the attention is not focused on self-denial, let alone immolation of the body. The Confucians do not take the body as, by nature, an impediment to full self-realization. To them, the body provides the context and the resources for ultimate self-transformation.

Understandably, Confucian education takes the "ritualization of the body" as the point of departure in the development of the person.¹ Lest the purpose

¹For a general discussion on ritualization as humanization, see Tu Wei-ming, "Li as Process of Humanization," Philosophy East and West, 22, no. 2 (April 1972): 187–201.
be misconstrued as the imposition of well-established societal norms of behavior upon the innocent youth, "ritualization" as a dynamic process of interpersonal encounter and personal growth is not passive socialization but active participation in recognizing, experiencing, interpreting, and representing the communicative rationality that defines society as a meaningful community. In other words, through ritualization we learn not only the form of the accepted behavior but the grammar of action underlying the form as well. Surely, on the surface at least, it seems that we are socialized unsuspectingly, if not totally against our will, to become members of a linguistic and cultural community. We really do not have much choice in adopting the linguistic specificities of our mother tongue and the cultural particularities of our fatherland. Nevertheless, the Confucians believe that if we make a conscientious effort to actively incorporate the societal norms and values in our own conduct, we will be able to transcend the linguistic and cultural constraints of our society by transforming them into instruments of self-realization. Like poets who have mastered the subtleties of the language, articulating their innermost thoughts through them. Confucians who have become thoroughly proficient in the nuances of the ritual are said to be able to establish and enlarge others as well as themselves by bringing this personal knowledge to bear on daily practical living. The seeming naiveté of the Confucians in accepting their own linguistic and cultural universe as intrinsically meaningful and valuable is based on the collective judgment that the survival and continuation of their civilization is not a given reality but a communal attainment. This judgment is itself premised on a fundamental faith in the transformability and perfectibility of the human condition through communal self-effort.

Actually, for the Confucians, the intellectual recognition and experiential acceptance of the body as the point of departure for personal growth are the result of a strong commitment to a holistic view of self-realization. The body, as our physical nature, must be transformed and perfected so that it can serve as a vehicle for realizing that aspect of our nature known as the nature of i-li (rightness and principle), the moral nature, or simply the heart-mind (hsin).2 Even though the body is a constitutive part of our nature, it is the heart-mind that is truly human.

A person's temperament may significantly determine his natural disposition in a social environment. Whether he is introverted, passive, cold, contemplative, and shy, or extroverted, aggressive, warm, active, and assertive may very well be a reflection of his native endowments. Quite a few Chinese thinkers, for pragmatic and bureaucratic considerations as well as for social and aesthetic ones, have been fascinated by the classification and evaluation of distinctive character traits. A third-century treatise on the categorization of human beings according to talent and disposition remains to this day a compre-

2Mencius 6A:7.
hensive treatment and sophisticated analysis of personality types. However, despite the importance and irreducibility of the vital energy and raw stuff (the physical nature or the body) that we are endowed with, the main concern of Confucian education is the process through which we realize ourselves by transforming and perfecting what we are born with.

The Heart-Mind and Human Sensitivity

As Mencius notes, in regard to physical nature, the difference between humans and animals (birds or beasts) is quite small. What truly distinguishes human beings from animals is not the body but the heart-mind. Since the body is the proper home in which the heart-mind dwells, it is perhaps more appropriate to say that the heart-mind (in addition to the body or the body fully informed by the heart-mind) specifically defines the uniqueness of being human. Learning to be human means that the self-consciousness of the heart-mind initiates a process by which the body is transformed and perfected. The ritualization of the body can thus be understood as the active participation of the heart-mind to help the body to become a fitting expression of the self in a social context. To be sure, an act of the will or an existential decision is required when the heart-mind becomes fully aware of its role and function in bringing this process to fruition. For Confucius, the critical juncture occurred when he "set his heart upon learning" at fifteen. However, even the very young, when involved in simple rituals such as sprinkling water for the adults to sweep the floor or giving answers of yes or no to easy questions, exercise their hearts and minds in ritualizing their bodies. It is precisely because the heart-mind is housed in the body (although in practice it can be absent from it) that the human body takes on the profound spiritual significance that distinguishes it from the physical nature of birds and beasts. As a corollary, the body devoid of the heart-mind, is, strictly speaking, no longer human and can easily degenerate into a state of unreflexivity indistinguishable from the physical nature of birds and beasts.

The most prominent feature of the heart-mind is sympathy, the ability to share the suffering of others. This is why the Chinese character hsin—like the French word conscience, which involves both cognitive and affective dimensions of consciousness—must be rendered as "heart-mind". For hsin signifies both intellectual awareness and moral awakening. By privileging sympathy as the defining characteristic of true humanity, Confucians underscore feeling as the basis for knowing, willing, and judging. Human beings are therefore defined primarily by their sensitivity and only secondarily by their rationality, volition, or intelligence.

3Unfortunately, Liu Shao's Treatise on Personalities (jen-u-u chih) is still not yet available in English translation.

4Analects 2:4.
Expanding Sensitivity: The Perfection of the Self

Learning to be human, in this sense, is to learn to be sensitive to an ever-expanding network of relationships. It may appear to be a consciousness-raising proposition, but it entails the dynamic process of transforming the body as a private ego to the body as an all-encompassing self. To use the Confucian terminology of Master Ch’eng Hao (1032–85), the whole enterprise involves the realization of the authentic possibility of “forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things.” Concretely, for Confucians, in learning to be human beings by cultivating the capacity to empathize with the negative feelings of one’s closest kin—namely, by directly referring to our own hearts and minds—we should understand the reasonableness of the following dictum: “Do not do unto others what I would not want others to do unto me.”

The ability to feel the suffering of others or the inability to endure their suffering empowers us to establish an experiential connection with another human being. This provides a great resource for realizing our moral nature (the nature of rightness and principle). The Confucians believe that our sympathetic bonding to our parents is not only biologically natural but morally imperative, for it is the first step in learning to appreciate ourselves not in isolation but in communication. Indeed, since the Confucians perceive the self as a center of relationships rather than as an isolable individuality, the ability to show intimacy to those who are intimate is vitally important for allowing the closed private ego to acquire a taste for the open communicating self so that the transformation of the body can start on a concrete experiential basis.

But if we extend sympathy only to our parents, we take no more than the initial step toward self-realization. By embodying our closest kin in our sensitivity, we may have gone beyond egoism, but without the learned ability to enter into fruitful communication outside the immediate family, we are still confined to nepotism. Like egoism, nepotism fails to extend our sensitivity to embody a larger network of human relationships and thus limits our capacity for self-realization. Similarly, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and chauvinistic nationalism are all varying degrees of human insensitivity. In the dynamic process of self-realization, they are inertia or limitation. In either case, they are detrimental to the human capacity for establishing a community encompassing humanity as a whole.

Confucian communitarianism, far from being a romantic utopian assertion about equality, unity, and universality, takes as its theoretical and practical basis the natural order of things in human society: the family, neighborhood, kinship, clan, state, and world. In fact, it recognizes the necessity and legitimacy


6Analects 15:23.
of these structures, both as historically evolved institutions and socially differentiated organizations. They are natural to the human community not only because they enable us to define ourselves in terms of the breadth and depth of human-relatedness but also because they provide both material and spiritual resources for us to realize ourselves. The Confucians do not accept the status quo as necessarily rational. Actually their main mission is to improve on the current situation by bridging the gap between what the status quo is and what it can and ought to be. Confucians are in the world but not of the world. They take an active role in changing the world by managing it from within; instead of adjusting themselves to the status quo, they try to transform it according to their moral idealism.

A salient feature of Confucians' moral idealism is their commitment to the efficacy of education as character building. The Confucian faith in the transformability and perfectibility of the human condition through communal self-effort implies that personal growth has not only ethical value but political significance. The ritualization of the body is relevant to political leadership as well as to social harmony in the family, neighborhood, and clan. Since Confucians believe that exemplary teaching is an integral part of political leadership, the personal morality of those involved is a precondition for good politics. Politics and morality are inseparable. What political leaders do at home is closely linked not only to their styles of leadership but also to the very nature of their politics. Self-realization, in this sense, is not a lonely quest for one's inner spirituality but a communicative act empowering one to become a responsible householder, an effective community worker, and a conscientious public servant. Confucians may not be successful in their political careers or may choose not to seek office, but they can never abandon their vocation as concerned intellectuals.

A concerned intellectual, the modern counterpart of the Confucian chün-tzu (nobleman or profound person), does not seek a spiritual sanctuary outside the world. He is engaged in this world, for total withdrawal from society and politics is not an option. Yet, although to be part of the "secular" world is the Confucian vocation, the Confucian calling is not to serve the status quo but to transform the "secular" world of wealth and power into a "sacred" community in which, despite egoistic drives, the quest for human flourishing in moral, scientific, and aesthetic excellence continuously nourishes our bodies and uplifts our hearts and minds.

The Ceaseless Process of Human Flourishing

Understandably, to become a mature person (an adult), in the Confucian sense, is not to attain a limited professional or personal goal but to open oneself up to the ceaseless process of human flourishing. The becoming process, rather than an attained state of being, defines the Confucian personality. One's criti-
cal self-awareness in the later stages of one’s maturation (e.g., at the age of fifty, when Confucius confessed to have known the Mandate of Heaven)\(^7\) ought to be directed to the authentic possibilities of further growth in moral development. Unlike scientific and aesthetic talents, sensitivity in ethics never declines and, properly cultivated, it becomes more subtle and refined.

Nevertheless, a person becomes a personality not by conscientiously obeying conventional rules of conduct but by exemplifying a form of life worth living; indeed by establishing a standard of self-transformation as a source of inspiration for the human community as a whole. The interchange between an exemplary teacher and the students aspiring to become householders, community workers, or public servants is never one-way. As fellow travelers on the Way, they form a community of the like-minded so that the project of human flourishing becomes a joint venture, mutually admonishing and mutually encouraging. The exemplary teacher as an achieved personality in the eyes of the students must continue to cultivate his inner resources for self-transformation. Confucians do not believe in fixed personalities. While they regard personalities as accomplishments, they insist that the strength of one’s personality lies not in its past glories but in its future promises. Real personalities are always evolving. This is why fundamental improvement in the quality of existence is possible for even a human being a breath away from death: “Thou shall not judge the person conclusively before the coffin is sealed!”\(^8\)

This faith in and commitment to the transformability and perfectibility of the human condition through communal self-effort enables Confucians to perceive each person as a center of relationships who is in the process of ultimate transformation as a communal act. The “ultimacy” in this seemingly humanistic enterprise is premised on the ability of the human heart-mind, without departing from its proper home (the body), to have the sensitivity to establish an internal resonance with Heaven by fully comprehending its Mandate. Sensitivity so conceived is a “silent illumination.” It is neither a gift from an external source nor a knowledge acquired through empirical learning. Rather, it is an inner quality of the heart-mind, the shining wisdom that a ritualized body emits for its own aesthetic expression. Such an expression is neither private nor individualistic, but communal.

As mentioned, for the Confucian to bring self-transformation to fruition (to its ultimacy), he must transcend not merely egoism but nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and chauvinistic nationalism. These undesirable habits of thought, perceived as varying degrees of human insensitivity, limit the full potential of the silent illumination of the human heart-mind to manifest itself. The

\(^7\)Analects 2:4.

\(^8\)This common expression is still widely used in China. Although it is a popular idiom rather than an assertion in the Confucian classics, it vividly captures the Confucian spirit that self-realization never completes and that, as long as a person lives, he is still redeemable.
Confucian insistence that we must work through our families, communities, and nations to realize ourselves is not at all incompatible with the Confucian injunction that we must go beyond nepotism, parochialism, and chauvinistic nationalism to fully embody our humanity. Actually, the seemingly contradictory assertions signify a dynamic process that defines the richness of the Confucian way of learning to be human.

On the one hand, Confucians, in contrast to individuals, take the communal path by insisting that, as a center of relationships, a personality comes into being by fruitfully interacting with its natural human environment—the family, kin, community, and the state. This process of continuously communicating with an ever-expanding network of human relationships enables the self to embody an increasingly widening circle of inclusiveness in its own sensitivity. On the other hand, Confucians, as opposed to collectivists, firmly establish the “subjectivity” of the person as sui generis. No social program, no matter how lofty, can undermine the centrality of selfhood in Confucian learning. After all, Confucians see learning for the sake of the self as the authentic purpose of education. To be sure, the self as an open and communicating center of relationships is intimately connected with other selves; far from being egoistic, it is communal. However, by stressing the centrality of the self in learning to be human, the Confucians advocate ultimate self-transformation, not only as social ethics but also as the flourishing of human nature with profound religious significance.

**Forming One Body with Earth and Myriad Things**

For Confucians to fully realize themselves, it is not enough to become a responsible householder, effective social worker, or conscientious political servant. No matter how successful one is in the sociopolitical arena, the full measure of one’s humanity cannot be accommodated without a reference to Heaven. The highest Confucian ideal is the “unity of Man and Heaven,” which defines humanity not only in anthropological terms but also in cosmological terms. In the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Chung-yung*), the most authentic manifestation of humanity is characterized as “forming a trinity with Heaven and Earth.”

Yet, since Heaven does not speak and the Way in itself cannot make human beings great—which suggests that although Heaven is omnipresent and may be omniscient, it is certainly not omnipotent—our understanding of the Mandate of Heaven requires that we fully appreciate the rightness and principle inherent in our heart-minds. Our ability to transcend egoism, nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and chauvinistic nationalism must be extended.

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to anthropocentrism as well. To make ourselves deserving partners of Heaven, we must be constantly in touch with that silent illumination that makes the rightness and principle in our heart-minds shine forth brilliantly. If we cannot go beyond the constraints of our own species, the most we can hope for is an exclusive, secular humanism advocating man as the measure of all things. By contrast, Confucian humanism is inclusive; it is predicated on an "anthropocosmic" vision. Humanity in its all-embracing fullness "forms one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things." Self-realization, in the last analysis, is ultimate transformation, that process which enables us to embody the family, community, nation, world, and cosmos in our sensitivity.